

**‘LIKE AN EMPRESS
FROM ANOTHER
PLANET’:**

ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN’S

**COUTURE
D’ORDURES**

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‘Like an Empress from Another Planet’: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s *couture d’ordures*

Wearing the lip of a burnished coal scuttle for a helmet strapped to her head with a scarlet belt which buckled under the chin, Christmas tree baubles of yellow and red as earrings, a tea strainer about her neck, a short yellow skirt barely covering her legs, and over the precision of her breasts a single length of black lace she would walk the city.

- Djuna Barnes, ‘Baroness Elsa’ c. 1933

The iconoclastic and ultra-provocative costumes of the avant-garde visual artist, electrifying poet, model, performer and dramatically titled Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874 – 1927) were Greenwich Village legend. Often cast as some terrifying midtown Medusa, parading through the streets with a pack of half-starved dogs on gilded harness, head shaved and shellacked in high vermillion, her body rattling with an assortment of tin cans, toy soldiers and teaspoons, accounts of the Baroness’s sensational costumes are not hard to come by. While modernist bulwark Wallace Stevens was apparently put off venturing below 14th st for fear of an encounter with ‘the Baroness’, others recalled with delight the formidable force terrorising the streets, subways and artist’s studios of the city - sometimes wrapped only in a Mexican blanket or brandishing a plaster cast penis, sometimes in the marginally more decorous costumes that she constructed out of strange combinations of cutlery, coal scuttles and curtain rings.ⁱ



Fig. 1. International News Photography, *Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven working as a model*. 7 December 1915. Bettman/Corbis photo agency.

More than just the colourful stuff of anecdote, attention to the forms and functions of the Baroness's wearable art points not only to a pioneering performative art practice that placed the ageing female body and its sexuality centre stage, but also 'fleshes out' the contours of the Baroness's radical Dada practice. Unlike the Duchampian Readymade, which tends towards the single, industrially mass-produced and seemingly unused utilitarian object, the Baroness's complex sculptural assemblages and multi-media collages combined the used, broken and discarded commodities that she collected from the city's streets with organic materials such as bone, feathers and

wax. Applying this trash directly to her body in an elaborate and outlandish form of *couture d'ordures*, the Baroness reproduced her own body as a living, moving and resolutely handmade Dada assemblage, one that directly challenges the dominant visual narrative of New York Dada as all glassy bachelors, endlessly reproducible Readymades and erotically charged mechanical fantasies.

Recalling his first meeting with the Baroness in 1917, American artist George Biddle's often-quoted testimony serves as a particularly good introduction:

I met her in my Philadelphia studio [...] Having asked me, in her harsh, high-pitched German stridency, whether I required a model, I told her that I should like to see her in the nude. With a royal gesture she swept apart the folds of a scarlet raincoat. She stood before me quite naked – or nearly so. Over the nipples of her breasts were two tin tomato cans, fastened with a green string behind her back. Between the tomato cans hung a very small bird-cage and within it a crestfallen canary. One arm was covered from wrist to shoulder with celluloid curtain rings, which she later admitted to having pilfered from a furniture display in Wanamaker's. She removed her hat, which had been tastefully but inconspicuously trimmed with gilded carrots, beets and other vegetables. Her hair was close cropped and dyed vermillion.ⁱⁱ

A vivid portrait of the Baroness from the height of her 'art dazzle' days, Biddle's account here brings together recurrent themes in discussions of the Baroness by her contemporaries: a fascination with her 'boyish' body and unapologetic foreignness, the abrasive shock of her nudity set against her distinct mode of *couture d'ordures*, and her dramatic, indomitable disregard for gendered and aesthetic convention.

It also highlights the centrality of modelling and performance to her Dada practice. As a model and an artist the Baroness worked on and through her body – indeed she saw little difference between the two, explaining to a bemused *New York Times* reporter in 1915 that 'I am not merely the model who poses. I seek as best I may to give artistic expression, to show forth something of the thoughts within me'.ⁱⁱⁱ In her own autobiographic account used first by her second husband Felix Greve in his scandalous novel *Fanny Essler* (1905) and later reclaimed in a series of letters to her friend and would-be-biographer Djuna Barnes the Baroness describes the thrill of performing as part of Henry de Vry's *tableaux vivants*

I was taken right away for the 'marble figures' – which – as I later learned – takes the best figure – even though I was upholstered considerably with cardboard breasts and cotton hips [...] I felt the pride of a prima donna.^{iv}

As Irene Gammel and Amelia Jones have detailed, the young Elsa Plötz's appropriation of this mode of costuming with its focus on the body and its augmentation not only underpins her later New York constructions but, in foregrounding her own erotic experience over her audience's, her performances disrupt and distort deeply

entrenched notions of the female nude in Western art-historical traditions as shaped and controlled by male desire and power.

Exchanging the cardboard breasts and cotton hips for tin cans and quotidian objects, Biddle's account brings both the early *tableaux vivants* and the more dazzling New York performances directly together, highlighting the deeply interwoven nature of her modelling and costuming practices. The stolen rings, gilded vegetable and used food tins built up over her body are of course highly representative of her waste-based collage aesthetic, but they also underline the Baroness's aggressive appropriation and reinterpretation of the nude itself.



Fig. 2. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven posing, Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection.

As Lynda Nead has emphasised, within western art-historical discourse 'more than any other subject the female nude connotes "Art"'.^v Removing the (implied male) artist mediator, the Baroness appropriates the role of the nude as an active, embodied and autobiographic mode of performance, transforming her body directly into a shifting site of expressive artistic possibility. Far from the smooth and impenetrable ideal of the classical nude however, in truly grotesque form, this is a body that is 'unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits'.^{vi} What Biddle sees as she parts the raincoat is not the smooth surface of her skin, the boundary line of her body, but its horrifying openness, the tomato tins and celluloid rings shockingly displaying the body's interpenetration with the city she moves through. Recovering the old, the used and the useless thrown up by the city and reimagining them into fantastic new relationships, these improbable ornaments were gifted to friends or applied directly to her own body as she paraded through the streets, and functioned as both a product and a critique of a burgeoning American consumer culture. Reimagining New York Dada through her fleshy, messy body, the Baroness's brand of Dada firmly rejects the stunted mecanamorphic love-machines and industrial rationalism underpinning the Duchampian Readymade.

While these costumes sensationally reworked her body as a living canvas she would also work directly on the surface of her skin, a striking self-fashioning practice vividly recalled in accounts of her lacquered scalp, black lipstick, pioneering adoption of nail varnish and flashes of her face painted in shades of emerald green or lurid yellows. Turning finally to her *Portrait of Berenice Abbott* (c. 1923) we can see how her radical approach to self-fashioning informed her work in more traditional modes. Bold and brightly coloured, the portrait brings together a vast range of unconventional materials including coloured tin foil, glass beads, cut and pasted paper, tinted lacquer, celluloid, feathers, brooches, stones and hand-stitched scraps of fabric. Recovered and reused, discarded items become ornamental and decorative in the visually riotous play between foreground and background, while the juxtaposition of man-made and organic materials complements the techno-primitivism at play in the rendering of Abbott as both Primitivist fetish and machine-age gorgon.



Fig. 3. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Portrait of Berenice Abbot*, c. 1923. Mixed media collage of synthetic materials, cellophane, metal foils, paper, stones, metal, objects, cloth, paint, etc., 8 5/8 x 9 1/4 in. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MOMA).

The elegant line of Abbott's elongated neck is offset by the chunky beaded choker, itself highly reminiscent of the elaborate wearable ornaments that the Baroness was known to gift to her friends. Highly decorative, the shimmering cantered squares of pasted tinfoil arranged across her shoulders at once evoke the luxurious golds and richly textured patterns of Gustave Klimt's canvases and the Baroness's own waste-based costumes. With her sharp, exaggerated gilded lashes and the swirling contours of colour that make up the surface of her skin here, the

portrait of Abbott vividly connects the subject to the artist's own, well-documented modes of self-display, directly recalling the Baroness's elaborate costuming on the occasion of a visit to the French consulate:

I went to the consulate with a large-wide sugarcoated birthday cake upon my head with fifty flaming candles lit – I felt just so spunky and affluent! In my ear I wore sugar plums or matchboxes – I forget which. Also I had put on several stamps as beauty spots on my emerald-painted cheeks and my eyelashes were made of gilded porcupine quills – rustling coquettishly – at the consul – with several ropes of dried figs dangling around my neck to give him a suck once and again – to entrance him. I should have liked to wear gaudy coloured rubber boots up to my hips with a ballet skirt of genuine gold paper white lace paper covering it (to match the cake) – but I couldn't afford that!^{vii}

As a rare account of the Baroness's approach to wearable art by the artist herself, this is a fascinating fragment documenting her modes of self-display. Turning her body into a living collaged canvas she freely applies paint and postage stamps directly to her skin, extending the limits of her body through the application of vegetable and animal products as she transforms herself into a sugar-coated birthday cake burlesque in honour of her fiftieth birthday. Mixing her mediums and transferring material from her collage portraits to her body and back again, the Baroness's *couture d'ordures* operates at the very core of her Dada practice, as she refashioned herself as 'the only one, living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, is dada'.^{viii}

ⁱ Djuna Barnes, 'Elsa – Notes', 24 April 1933, cited by Francis Naumann, *New York Dada 1915 – 23*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 173

ⁱⁱ George Biddle, *An American Artist's Story* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 137

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Refugee Baroness Poses as a Model', *New York Times*, 5 December 1915

^{iv} Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Baroness Elsa*, ed. by Paul Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigie (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1992), pp. 44-5

^v Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1

^{vi} Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Isowsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984), p. 26

^{viii} Jane Heap, 'Dada', in *The Little Review* 8.2 (Spring 1922)

